

The utilisation of the Internet by Palestinian English language teachers focusing on uses, practices and barriers and overall contribution to professional development

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a study designed to investigate the utilisation of the Internet by English Language teachers in Gaza focusing on uses, practices and barriers. A questionnaire was developed based on literature (Kabilan 2003; Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2002) and was administered to 274 English language teachers in Gaza schools. Data reveal that 130 teachers are using the Internet for teaching English in classrooms as well as for various activities that enhance their professional development, such as searching for TESL-related information and to share ideas with other teachers. Nevertheless, it was found that English language teachers in Gaza have not fully utilised the Internet because of barriers related to time factor, accessibility and facilities. It is suggested that for the proliferation of Internet practices, there needs to be an increase in funding for technology, an introduction of computer/technology education, provision of pedagogical training for teachers and, a provision of administrative support.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that the Internet is a tool that has immense potentials in encouraging and facilitating learning and communication (see Kabilan 2005; Williams et al 2000). As a new way of acquiring and facilitating the processing of information, the Internet can encourage learners not only to view themselves as being in charge of their own learning, but also to perceive teachers as facilitators in the learning process. Hence, in terms of education:

it is becoming increasingly feasible to think in everyday terms about the practical applications of learning which rely upon Internet and mobile communications (Demirbilek 2009, p.12).

The reason for such a positive outlook of classroom dynamics is because with the Internet, there are a myriad of opportunities and resources for the learners to get exposed to authentic use of communicative English. For teachers, these opportunities and resources also entail greater and far more effective ways of promoting and facilitating English language learning in a more authentic manner such as the use of e-mails for collaborative writing projects (see Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2006) and the use of online discussions to analyse and evaluate ideas and opinions (see Bowman et al 2000; Anderson & Kanuka 1997).

Though it is quite obvious that we have already entered a new information age which links technology and the teaching of English, the promise of the Internet for educational use has not been fully explored yet in some countries and the average schools in those countries still only use the Internet to a limited extent. This limited use is mainly because of the lack of facilities in

schools, high cost of accessing to the Internet and teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in using the Internet for educational purposes. This article reports a pioneering study in the context of Gaza, Palestine that investigated the utilisation of the Internet by English Language teachers in Gaza focusing on uses, practices and barriers, and to what extent the Internet contributes to the teachers' overall professional development. By carrying out this study, educational administrators and planners would be able to identify the instructional potentials for using the Internet to facilitate the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and the possibilities of using the Internet as a source of authentic instructional materials and professional development for the English language teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When integrated appropriately, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and Internet technologies can support experiential learning. The experiential learning can be in the form of providing effective feedback to learners, enabling pair and group work, enhancing student achievement, providing access to authentic materials, facilitating greater interaction and individualising instruction. In addition, the CMC and related technologies allow independence from a single source of information and motivate learners (Lee 2000; Warschauer & Healey 1998). In addition, integration of such technology in the classroom can have a positive impact on development of skills and attitudes towards school (Mathew & Dehery-Poirier 2000).

According to Viadero (1997, p.3), since the mid 1990s, educators have begun using the Internet resources for a variety of instructional purposes and favouring electronic classroom environments in which students are able to, and are expected to (1) take charge of their own learning, (2) learn to think critically and analytically, (3) work collaboratively and (4) create products to demonstrate what they have learned. In doing so, according to Coley (1997), educators are confronted by a number of methodological and practical issues: (a) they need to remember that technology is only one component of an instructional activity, (b) assessments of the impact of technology are really assessments of instruction enabled by technology, and (c) the outcomes are highly dependent on the quality of implementation of the instructional design.

This emphasis on technology, CMC and the Internet in classrooms means the way teachers approach teaching and learning should move from a teacher-centred classroom to a more student-centred one. In this study, the Palestinian teachers are experiencing similar change of roles as they begin integrating Internet into their teaching and learning. Levy (1993) claims that the use of Internet resources in EFL/ESL can free teachers from isolated materials production role, which have always been time and effort consuming. Teachers can make use of materials produced by recognised educational organisations or by responsible and experienced teachers and offer these materials to their students. In this way, the teachers' role is expanding to encompass more facilitating and providing choices than being restricted by the shortage of teaching materials or their limited knowledge of computer programming or the capabilities of authoring software.

Alomari, (2009) and Maor (2003) argue that teachers should take on the roles of a researcher or a facilitator to engage students to become involved in active, collaborative and constructive learning experiences. However, without a teacher to organise the resources and then contextualise the learning possibilities within the curricula, the power of the Internet will dissipate and the potential of teaching will be lost. Therefore, teachers need to engage in more powerful roles that include not only using technology appropriately, but also finding ways to build in meaning purposeful connections and relationships to the larger world and community outside the school building (McCombs 2000).

Hence, teachers' practices of the Internet have to mirror their new roles so that learning experiences can be enhanced and enriched through engaging learners in authentic and meaningful activities that the Internet can facilitate and support. Earlier studies have explored such possibilities with quite exciting outcomes. LeLoup (1997), for instance, notes that e-mail provided teachers the access to discussion groups and newsgroups, which in turn allowed teachers to design activities and projects that enhanced their curriculum and provided students with opportunities to communicate directly with foreign language speakers. These discussions allowed the teachers to gain confidence and to learn and rely on and support each other (Taylor & Stuhlmann 1998). Also, through discussions in an online networking environment, English language teachers contributed to mutual encouragement and recognition amongst teachers, which took form in giving positive feedback on ideas, materials and classroom practices (Tsui et al 1996) that benefit learners. Also, the Internet offers English teachers the opportunity for ongoing collaboration and professional development through various online activities such as online sharing, online collaboration and online researching (see Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2004; Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2006; Kabilan 2005) that contributed to better classroom practices in terms of teaching and learning of English.

INTERNET IN PALESTINE

Gaza, the context of this study, is a coastal region of the Middle East, 140 sq mi (370 sq km), on the Mediterranean Sea, adjoining Egypt and Israel. Densely populated and impoverished, it is mainly inhabited by Palestinian refugees. According to Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2009) the estimated population of Gaza Strip in 2009 was 1.5 million. The Ministry of Education, since the administrative era of the Palestinian National Authority assumes responsibilities towards the education of the Palestinian people, sets the educational policies for general education, prepares plans to secure compulsory education for grades 1-10 and promotes free education for both 1st and 2nd secondary grades.

The cost of going online in Palestine, as in other Middle East countries, is relatively expensive (Warf & Vincent, 2007). For instance, the dial-up access costs between USD \$10 and USD \$20 per month in a society where the average Palestinian wage is USD \$120 per month (International Solidarity Movement 2008). The bandwidth in Palestine, including Gaza, ranges from 128KB to 768KB. The Internet for people of Palestine is a world in itself that has nothing to do with borders. As such, the Internet is highly valued by the people of Palestine mainly because of its features that are ubiquitous, far reaching and connects people and communities together. This is further enhanced by the fact that Palestinians are increasingly becoming more computer literate.

In recent times, Palestinians have recorded high usage of the Internet. For example, in 2006, , 243,000 i.e. 7.5% of the Palestinian population are Internet users. As of June 2010, the number of Palestinians who accessed to the Internet increased significantly to 356,000 i.e. 14.2% of the Palestinian population (Internet World Stats, 2010). This rapid increase is mainly because of the increase in services and facilities that the telecommunication and Internet companies in Palestine are providing (Khoury-Machool 2007). This tremendous increase of Internet access indicate that the Internet in Palestine has challenged all odds and is comparable to the ICT practices of other Arab countries in terms of Internet connectivity and excelling in the desire for the implementation for ICT in all aspects of life.

The Internet in Palestine has a distinctive and unique role to play, particularly in politics and freedom movement. Though communication and freedom of movement are limited due to security reasons, the use of Internet technology, has encouraged communication, interaction and networking of the Palestinian youths. Khoury-Machool (2007) believes that the Internet has been a *"true boundary breaker under siege conditions in the occupied territories"* (p.31). Realising that

it is physically impossible to remove checkpoints or lift curfews, the youths of Palestine have now turned to telecommunications (including the Internet) to network with fellow Palestinians, or access to people, activities and locations that are far and isolated in their efforts to initiate resistance movement (Khoury-Machool 2007).

The Internet has brought significant changes to the education landscape too. Palestinian teachers are quite capable of using the Internet to assist them in their daily teaching activities such as preparing materials, presentations and homework (Pacetti 2008). This is as a result of the strong thrust initiated by the Palestinian Ministry of Education to incorporate information technology in education. This incorporation brings new dilemmas and challenges within a larger strand of change that teachers are constantly expected to learn and cope up with. The integration of computer and ICT into everyday teaching and learning is of high priority as most schools of Gaza are equipped with computer laboratories to cater for computer literacy programmes, which are managed by computer teachers. By connecting these labs to Internet, it was expected to further enhance the quality of education in all fields especially for the teaching and learning of English. In addition, it is the aspiration of the Palestinian Ministry of Education & Higher Education (MOEHE) to utilise and integrate information communication technology (ICT) and its technology in elevating teachers' professional development through the Palestinian Education Initiative (PEI). In terms of ICT, the *"overall objective of the PEI is the enhancement of the future of education in Palestine through pedagogical techniques empowered by technology that catalyzes socio-economic development"* (Palestine Education Initiative, 2005).

The use of the Internet in English language instruction in Palestine is still at its infancy stage. Understandably, no empirical attempt has been made to investigate English language teachers' Internet uses, practices and barriers in Palestine. Hence, this study attempts to shed some light on English language teachers' uses, practices and barriers of using the Internet as an instructional tool in schools in Gaza. In addition, this study will also examine to what extent the Internet contributes to the teachers overall professional development. Although there is an adequate knowledge base and empirical research about the impact of technology particularly the Internet on student outcomes in other contexts, e.g. (Kannan & Macknish 2000; Stepp-Greany 2002), there is a pressing need for such a study in Gaza, Palestine. The findings of this study will help researchers and administrators to comprehend the needs of English teachers in terms of Internet use. In addition, such research will pave the way for more extensive and in-depth empirical research of this nature in a country where the Internet is seriously transforming the socio-political lives of its people (Khoury-Machool 2007).

The research questions for this study are:

1. To what extents do the Palestinian English language teachers' use the Internet?
2. What are Palestinian English language teachers' practices of using the Internet for English language teaching?
3. What are the barriers that hinder Palestinian English language teachers' use and practices of the Internet in terms of English language teaching?
4. To what extent does the Internet contribute to the overall professional development of the Palestinian English language teachers?

METHODS

There are 383 government primary and secondary schools in Gaza, Palestine, with 9096 full-time teachers of various disciplines and subjects (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). There are about 1200 full-time English language teachers (Ministry of Education & Higher Education, 2009) in Gaza, Palestine. A research assistant, who was familiar with the government

schools, and knew the school principals and English teachers in the city of Gaza, was contacted via telephone, and was briefed about the research and the questionnaire. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a population of 1200 requires a sample size of 291 respondents. With this figure in mind, the research assistant was able to identify 300 full-time English language teachers, who were teaching in government primary and secondary schools in Gaza, Palestine, and more importantly, who were willing to participate in the study. The information of these Palestinian English language teachers was obtained through the 'snowballing' technique, i.e. getting names and contact information of full-time English language teachers through the research assistant's contacts and personal networking.

A survey was the most effective research method in answering the research questions of this study, as well as reaching teachers to obtain data. Questionnaires were sent to teachers, who were teaching in non-accessible areas (due to curfews or security reasons), via e-mail or by post. For other teachers, questionnaires were given to the teachers personally. The 300 teachers answered the questionnaires and returned them to the research assistant, who was based in Gaza. The research assistant then compiled the questionnaires and sent them to the authors by post. A total of 275 completed questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 91.7%. The participants comprised 142 males and 133 females.

INTRUMENTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The instrument used is a questionnaire that consisted of four major dimensions: (a) demographic information, (b) Internet uses, (c) practices of Internet and (d) barriers of Internet use (adapted from Kabilan 2003; Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2002). The specific constructs or dimensions that were adapted were identified based on their relevance to the research questions for this study. Each item in the dimensions was then closely examined for its relevance and suitability in the context of the Palestinian English language teachers and the teaching of English in Palestine. As a result, some of the items were rephrased or reworded to ensure the Palestinian teachers would be able to make sense and understand the items in the questionnaire. Three experts in the field of ICT reviewed and revised the questionnaire for its content validity. The questionnaire was piloted with 30 teachers from 5 schools in Gaza and showed a reliability index of $r = .81$ (Cronbach alpha), indicating that the questionnaire had a high level of internal consistency. Based on the pilot study, the number of items in the practices of the Internet dimension was increased to at least ten items per sub-dimensions.

The Internet uses dimension encompassed (1) Internet access and (2) amount of time spent using the Internet (hours per week). The Internet practices dimension had three sub-dimensions: (1) degree of importance of Internet activities using e-mails, chat rooms, messenger tools and online forums (12 items), (2) degree of importance of Internet activities using World Wide Web (www) or web pages (10 items) and, (3) degree of importance of the overall use of Internet for teachers' professional development (10 items). All the three sub-dimensions had a 5-point Likert response that ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". To determine the teachers' uses and practices of the Internet, gathered data were analysed using frequency, mean, standard deviation and percentages. The barriers of Internet use dimension has seven items that enquired the problems or difficulties that they faced in using the Internet for their practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 275 returned questionnaire, only 130 (47.2%) teachers indicate that they have access to the Internet and have used the Internet for some kind of teaching and learning activities in classrooms or have used the Internet for professional development purposes. Remaining

teachers (n=144) report that they have not used the Internet at all for the purpose of teaching English, even though some of them might have access to the Internet. The teachers' reasons for not using the Internet are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: *Palestinian teachers' reasons for not using the Internet*

| Reasons for not using the Internet | | Yes f (%) | No f (%) |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1 | Don't know how to use | 102 (71) | 42 (29) |
| 2 | No time to learn about the Internet | 81 (56) | 63 (44) |
| 3 | No time to use | 64 (44) | 80 (56) |
| 4 | No interest at all | 42 (29) | 102 (61) |

Most of the teachers are not using the Internet mainly because they do not know how to use the Internet and they have no time to learn about the Internet. Only a 29% of the teachers indicate that they have no interest at all in terms of using the Internet for teaching English. Studies have shown that there are teachers who do not prefer online activities, and sometimes it is very difficult to encourage teachers' engagement in online activities (Kabilan 2003; Moonen & Voogt 2000; Owen 2000). These are because teachers have little or no knowledge and experience of technology or telecommunications in general (Levin & Thurston 1996), just like what was stated by the Palestinian teachers in this study.

For the following sections, the data analysed and discussed would be concerned with the Palestinian teachers who have access to the Internet and have used the Internet for the teaching of English.

Palestinian English Language Teachers' Use of Internet

Table 2 shows the number of hours that Palestinian English language teachers who accessed and used the Internet in a week (by hours). Majority of the teachers spend about 1-5 hours per week, and 12.3% spend more than 20 hours per week.

Table 2: *Overall usage of Internet in a week (by hours)*

| Number of hours | f (%) |
|--------------------|-----------|
| 1-5 | 56 (43.1) |
| 6-10 | 31 (23.8) |
| 11-15 | 18 (13.8) |
| 16-20 | 9 (6.9) |
| more than 20 hours | 16 (12.3) |
| N | 130 |

Tables 1 and 2 imply that the issues of accessibility and lack of facilities and lack of time are the key factors that hinder teachers' effective utilisation of the Internet in Gaza. The same issues and problems have been identified earlier by Demirbilek (2009) in the Turkish context and by Kabilan and Mohamed Amin (2004); Kabilan (2003), and Kabilan and Mohamed Amin (2002) in the Malaysian context. In the open-ended question of the problems faced in using the Internet, even though the 130 Palestinian teachers accessed to the Internet, they still lamented that they have difficulties accessing the Internet, lack the time, low level of connectivity, and high cost of computers and Internet facilities. These issues, to some extent, have hindered the teachers' use and practices of the Internet. Though the Internet overcomes the lack of time factor for some conventional form of professional development, it seems that the Palestinian teachers still do not have the time to use or learn more about the Internet. This is not surprising because teachers are busier than ever – teaching, writing reports, co-curricular activities, disciplining students, meetings, checking and marking students' work, invigilation of examinations, and the list goes on (Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2004).

Teachers' Practices and Barriers of the Internet and WWW

Table 3 describes the degree of importance of the teachers' practices of the Internet using; e-mails, chat rooms, messenger tools and online forums. Palestinian English language teachers in this study stress that their practices of the Internet are especially to develop their communication skills, increase their communication levels with other teachers and to seek information related to the teaching of English.

Other practices, as indicated in Table 3, are equally important to the Palestinian English language teachers, based on the mean scores for the items. They are most interested in trying to make their teaching the best practice that would enable meaningful and effectual learning experiences for the learners as they: (1) increasing communication with teachers, (2) collaborating with others, (2) seeking TESL-related information, (3) giving professional support to teachers and, (4) sharing and exchanging information. The most encouraging fact is that the teachers in this study indicated a strong willingness to take their own time to access the Internet for information that could help them to improve their own teaching practices even though the lack of time has been a huge stumbling block for these teachers. Kabilan and Mohamed Amin (2006) argue that teaching practices can be improved through the constant use of the Internet applications, in which the teachers are engaged in seeking information and researching, sharing and exchanging of ideas and knowledge and collaborating. White (2007) expresses similar views regarding the influence of new technologies in the conception and practice of language learning and teaching – it appears that not only the Palestinian teachers are prepared to learn about, understand and adjust to new learning environments, i.e. the Internet, but are also willing to learn new aspects of teaching English with the Internet.

Table 3: Teachers practices of the Internet (mean scores and standard deviation)

| Teachers Practices | Mean Scores | Std. Dev. |
|---|-------------|-----------|
| to develop communication skills | 4.41 | .643 |
| to increase communication between teachers | 4.23 | .677 |
| to seek TESL-related information | 4.21 | .566 |
| to combine new opinions with own | 4.17 | .649 |
| to enjoy when collaborating online with others | 4.15 | .821 |
| to give professional support to teachers | 4.12 | .722 |
| to develop a solid foundation for learning | 4.08 | .666 |
| to develop thinking skills | 4.02 | .698 |
| to share feedback by posting messages to others | 3.99 | .773 |
| to exchange TESL related information, knowledge and stories with teachers | 3.98 | .704 |
| to receive professional support from teachers | 3.94 | .691 |
| to discuss TESL issues with teachers | 3.91 | .731 |

In Table 3, two items with the lowest mean scores are receiving professional support from teachers and discussing TESL issues with teachers. Previous studies elsewhere also indicate that English teachers are less engaged in activities related to professional support and discussions of TESL issues with fellow teachers compared to other online activities such as developing communication skills and seeking TESL-related information (see Kabilan & Mohamed Amin 2006).

The Palestinian English language teachers' practices of WWW are mainly to search TESL-related information, to learn about a variety of TESL topics, to be involved in a world of information, to find materials and to read articles from online journals (Table 4). Equally important for these teachers' are finding exercises, test papers and questions and lesson plans. Table 4 indicate that the Palestinian English language teachers are willing to try to improve their teaching by engaging in activities such as searching for TESL-related information, reading academic articles and, searching for materials, exercises, questions and lesson plans. It appears that they are interested to use Internet applications for the teaching and learning of English.

Table 4: *Palestinian English language teachers practices of WWW*

| Teachers' Practices | Mean Scores | Std. Deviation |
|--|-------------|----------------|
| to search TESL-related information | 4.31 | .692 |
| to learn about variety of TESL topics | 4.29 | .741 |
| to be involved in a world of information | 4.25 | .778 |
| to find materials | 4.23 | .803 |
| to read academic articles from online journals | 4.21 | .804 |
| to present creative works | 4.11 | .838 |
| to experience creative works | 4.10 | .806 |
| to find exercises | 3.89 | .891 |
| to find questions for exams/tests | 3.87 | .968 |
| to find lesson plans | 3.80 | 1.030 |

Kabilan (2005) identifies teacher motivation as one of the key factors to:

teachers' survival and sustainability in their profession, preventing premature or total burnouts (p.52)

and further provided evidence of the uses and practices of the Internet and its applications by teachers that engaged learners in "*new types of learning experiences*" (p.53). Similarly, in this study, it is quite possible that the Palestinian teachers in this study, with the help from the Internet, were able to improve their teaching and thus, engage their learners in new learning experiences. These would certainly have encouraged the teachers to further broaden their engagement and involvement in online activities as they have denoted in Table 4 and Table 5. Goertler (2009) describes this as an "*important role in setting up and moderating the language learning opportunities*" (p.82) for learners. This entails that what teachers know and can do are the most important influences on what students learn and be competent in. Researches in teacher's involvement/use of technology and the enhancement of students' learning have attested to such claims (see Lupi & McIntyre 2003; Wright et al 2002).

Nevertheless, the Palestinian English language teachers in this study have indicated several barriers that they feel have seriously hindered their Internet use and practices. They are: (1) lack of facilities (3.96), (2) high cost of Internet access (3.96), (3) lack of time (3.72) and, (4) slow speed connection (3.72) (See Table 5). Only a small number of Palestinian teachers admit that they lack the knowledge on using the Internet expertly.

Table 5: Mean scores and standard deviation of barriers faced by Palestinian English language teachers in using the Internet

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|------|----------------|
| lack of facilities | 3.96 | .615 |
| high cost of Internet access | 3.96 | .772 |
| lack of time | 3.72 | .673 |
| connection-speed too slow | 3.72 | .770 |
| need to pay to get most academic materials | 2.81 | .916 |
| too many hits for a particular topic | 2.32 | .788 |
| lack of knowledge on using the Internet expertly | 2.18 | 1.098 |

Overall Contribution of the Internet for Teachers' Professional Development

The Palestinian teachers in this study regard the Internet as important in their effort to enhance their professional development. They use the Internet to share ideas/views with other teachers, to grow professionally, to improve teaching skills, and to be aware of the latest developments in ELT (Table 6).

Table 6: *The importance of Internet's contribution to the overall professional development of the Palestinian English language teachers (mean scores & standard deviation)*

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| to share ideas/views with other teachers | 3.72 | .981 |
| to grow professionally | 3.70 | 1.001 |
| to improve teaching skills | 3.68 | .973 |
| to be aware of the latest development in ELT | 3.62 | .959 |
| to expand experiences for career/promotion purposes | 3.53 | .933 |
| to learn new skills related to ELT | 3.52 | .958 |
| to prepare self for innovation | 3.52 | .900 |
| to facilitate thinking abilities | 3.49 | .966 |
| to gain motivation | 3.48 | .925 |
| to remain interested in teaching | 3.34 | .936 |

When asked if the Internet has had a positive impact on the teachers' practices of teaching and learning, 127 teachers (97.7%) stress that the Internet is useful and that the Internet is likely to lead to significant changes in the way they teach in the near future. Quite similarly, 76% of the Malaysian English language teachers in the Kabilan and Mohamed Amin's (2002) study state that the Internet has been useful to them, and have contributed meaningfully to their professional development. The Palestinian teachers' positive view of the Internet's contribution to their professional development indicate that the Internet is a tool for these teachers to get connected to the outside world, to retrieve information, to keep in touch with the latest news, ideas and approaches to the teaching and learning of English. Hence, the Internet has a huge potential to engage these Palestinian teachers to form collaboration with other teachers outside Palestine, especially for the construction of knowledge and ideas.

This study provides a clear indication that the Palestinian English teachers are not lagging behind in terms of information, knowledge and professional development as the Internet has kept them informed of the current educational development, especially in the field of teaching English. The current trends of research and practice in enhancing teachers' professional development using the Internet tools (or online professional development) are gearing towards "*a more self-managed and self-directed process of enhancing professional development*" (Kabilan 2005, p.55). With such use of the Internet, teachers actually have the opportunities to learn and gain valuable teacher competencies such as computing skills, creative and critical thinking and communication skills (Kabilan 2005). From the data, it is evident that the Palestinian teachers in this study are

aware of the potentials of the Internet to help them gain the competencies mentioned by Kabilan (2005).

The Palestinian teachers' views and practices of the Internet are indications of teachers:

beginning to experiment, individually and informally, with the idea of self-managed and self-directed professional development (Kabilan 2003, p.378).

This self-managed and self-directed experience using the Internet gives a real sense of ownership and relevance to the online professional development activities that the teachers are involved in such as engaging in intellectual discourses, participating in collaborations, and sharing and exchanging experiences, views, ideas and opinions.

With its abilities to transcend time (synchronous and asynchronous) and geographical boundaries (ubiquitous), the Internet and its tools have the ability to enhance and boost a teacher's professional development meaningfully, i.e. based on his/her needs, interests and expectations. In a context like Palestine, where there is very little freedom of movement, the Internet offers the platform and the opportunity for teachers to connect with other teachers from other regions without travelling. The Internet also widens teachers' access to the abundance and myriad of resources, knowledge, ideas and teaching materials that the teachers can identify and utilise for teaching purposes. All these contribute to their overall professional development.

CONCLUSION

This study examines Palestinian English language teachers' Internet uses, practices and barriers. It also identifies that the teachers hold high opinions of the values of the Internet to their teaching practices, as well as to their overall professional development. They are also optimistic that they will widely use the Internet and it is likely to lead to significant changes in the way they teach in the near future. Nevertheless, the low utilisation and access to the Internet – only 47.2% of the teachers in this study have access to the Internet or have used the Internet – suggests that a lot more needs to be done before the Palestinian teachers can truly benefit and gain from the Internet and its applications. The barriers, as stated by the teachers, should be further examined and ways of minimising the impact of those barriers on the teachers' practices of the Internet should be thought of, particularly by the educational authorities at the state level, as well as the school administrators.

The teachers who have access to the Internet in this study were more positive in terms of their use of the Internet and demonstrated useful and meaningful practices of the Internet in terms of English language teaching and their overall professional development. This, in many ways, implies that the Internet has the capability to present itself as a key component of education and has the potential to become an important source of information for the English language teachers in Gaza. Therefore, the relevant educational authorities should take the initiative to encourage the use of the Internet for teaching English in Gaza. This can be achieved by being more active and supportive in terms of:

- 1) increasing funding for technology (especially computers and Internet facilities and access);
- 2) introducing computer/technology education into existing curricular as well as teacher education and professional development programmes;
- 3) providing pedagogical training to enhance teachers' ability to acquire, appraise, and use information from the Internet to create efficient, creative and critical methods of teaching and learning processes and;

- 4) providing administrative support in the form of providing networks, technical support, resources and facilities, and time allocation for teachers.

All the above will greatly help Palestinian teachers in enhancing and enriching their use and practices of the Internet for teaching as well as their overall professional development. These suggestions echo the suggestions made earlier by Conole (2008):

....there now needs to be a much closer synergy between evaluation of the learner voice and their evolving use of technology, with the development of methodologies for supporting new forms of design, support for teachers in creating effective learning, and the development of appropriate policy and strategy to create technology-enhanced learning environments within our institutions (p.138).

The encouraging uses and practices of the Internet by the teachers in this study do not necessarily mean that the teachers are effectively using this facility to support their teaching and learning processes, or to enrich their professional development. Labbo and Place (2010, p.9) argue that effective integration of technology into teaching and learning requires a “*highly responsive pedagogy of multiliteracies*” that will place the learner at the “*center of meaning-making processes*” and are supported “*within the context of authentic learning*” (p.9).

Labbo and Place (2010) further add that technology integration should occur in learning process that are made deeper and must include four key components: 1) active engagement, 2) participation in groups, 3) frequent interaction and feedback, and 4) connection to real-world experts. Hence, more studies need to be carried out in the Palestinian context to examine to what extent the uses and practices of the Internet have contributed to actual learning in terms of the four components identified by Labbo and Place (2010), and benefited both the learners and the teachers. This should, primarily, be from the perspective of learners. Also needed is a study to gauge to what extent the Internet has influenced and contributed significantly and meaningfully to the professional development of Palestinian English language teachers.

The above suggestions and recommendations have to be taken seriously. As the younger generation of teachers enters the schooling system in Palestine and replaces the ‘older’ generation, we can postulate and predict that they will have an even stronger views and practices of the Internet for teaching and learning purposes. This new generation of teachers is the ‘digital natives’ who will have changed radically compared to the ‘digital immigrants’ (i.e. the previous generation of teachers), and the existing educational system is no longer relevant and suitable to the younger ‘net’ generation (Prensky 2001). Halse and Mallinson (2009)’s term of ‘Generation Y’ fits the description of the ‘Digital Natives’, and they believe that the ‘Generation Y’ (or ‘Yers’ as they refer to):

....thinks and learns differently from the preceding generations, due in particular to the rapidly changing, highly technological environment in which they were raised. Today’s world is very little like it was for the Yers’ parents, and is characterised by greatly increased connectivity, both to other people and to the Internet, via digital devices. Yers use a number of Internet applications, both recreationally and for other purposes, that are ideally suited to the characteristic ways they live, learn, and work.

Surely, these ‘digital natives’ or ‘Yers’ teachers will want to provide meaningful learning experiences that are relevant to their generation of learners; and those learning experiences are provided through the Internet. Future Palestinian English language teachers will certainly look

forward to using and practicing the Internet for a far more effective and safe, and a far more meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

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